

# CHAPTER 11:

## FARMING

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The city of Rome was a busy metropolis whose inhabitants, rich and poor, enjoyed the advantages and endured the disadvantages of life in a densely populated urban capital. Yet the earliest Romans were farmers, and agriculture remained the basis of Rome's economy. The wealthiest families in Rome had homes both in the city and in the country, and wealth was determined by the amount and quality of farmland a family possessed. Farms, both large and small, covered the countryside. They ranged from tiny plots of land with only a few workers to massive, slave-operated factory farms.

### SMALL FARMS AND FARMHOUSES

The smallest farms had as little as four acres of land and could be managed by the farmer and only one or two slaves. To maximize profits, every bit of land on these simple farms was usually cultivated. Because most farmers chose not to waste their precious farmland by building a farmhouse on fertile ground, they built their homes in nearby villages and commuted to work. In fact, archaeologists have unearthed only a few small Roman farmhouses, most of which are in the outlying Roman provinces of Germany and Britain, where there were comparatively fewer villages than in Italy. Since evidence about this type of dwelling is so rare, it is difficult to generalize about the nature of small Roman farmhouses.

### VILLAE RUSTICAE

Mid-size farms generally contained a modest residence, either for the owner or for the resident overseer. Known as a *villa rustica*, this type of farm and country residence complex normally consisted of an enclosed farmyard and several buildings, including slave dormitories and prison-like structures for locking up slaves (even the smallest operation of this type required several dozen slaves), animal barns, work areas for processing the produce, and storage space. Several spacious and attractively decorated living quarters, clearly intended to serve as a residence for the owner and his family, indicate that *villae rusticae* often served both as an active agricultural enterprise and as a country home for the family. Other *villae rusticae* were built solely for country living. Although there is evidence of extensive gardens, there appears to have been no agricultural activity at all.

### LATIFUNDIA

As Rome expanded and acquired new territories and slaves, a few of the more prosperous farmers began to buy up smaller farms and convert them into large, efficient operations worked entirely by slaves and their overseers. These large farms, known as *latifundia*, gradually dominated the farming industry and made the career of farming difficult, if not impossible, for small farmers.



Fig. 44.  
This reconstructed villa at Xanten, Germany shows the wide variety of plants grown by the Romans.



## WORKING FARMS

Ancient literature, images in ancient art, and the remains of farm tools and buildings unearthed by archaeologists provide clues about Roman farming practices. Romans knew how to adapt their crops to different types of soil and terrain. They maximized fertility by allowing land periodically to lie fallow, by rotating crops, and by combining crops. They understood the principles of water control and made use of drainage and irrigation. They cultivated olive trees, grape vines and vegetable gardens. And they developed an efficient system of harvesting and storing produce, especially grain and beans.

Slaves, under the direction of an overseer, himself often a slave, performed nearly all of the routine tasks. Livestock was an essential part of every farm. Oxen were harnessed to heavy farm equipment and horses and donkeys were used for lighter chores and as beasts of burden. And, of course, other farm animals were kept as food-producing livestock. Because of the abundance of animals on a farm, farmers needed to reserve a large portion of their land for the growing and storing of fodder.

## PROCESSING AND STORING

In a world without refrigeration, food that spoiled easily was consumed fresh and could not be transported long distances. Much of the produce, however, could be processed and packaged to extend its shelf life and then transported long distances by land and sea. Grains, nuts and legumes were separated from their non-edible parts, dried, and sealed into earthenware containers.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 45.

Donkeys were important farm animals and were used as beasts of burden or harnessed to light farm equipment and carts.



Fig. 46.

Workers unload heavy *amphorae* as record-keepers tally the shipment.

Presses turned perishable olives into oil, and crushers processed grapes into concentrate used to make wine and vinegar. Similarly, processed milk products, most notably cheese, if properly stored, lasted a long time.

## LIVESTOCK

The Romans raised a variety of animals. Besides the expected assortment of farm animals, such as cows, goats, sheep, pigs, and chickens, Romans also farmed fish and mollusks, such as trout and oysters, edible rodents, such as dormice, and often kept bees. Cattle and goats were raised for milk and cheese, horses and pigs for meat, sheep for wool, and poultry for eggs.





American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 47.

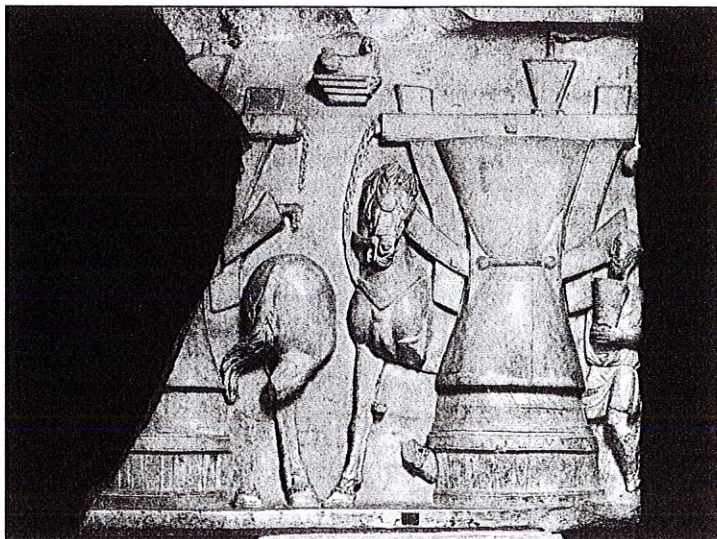
Shepherds took care of flocks of sheep and often worked for the master of a large farm.



Fig. 48.

Bakeries used millstones like these to grind their own grain for bread.

Older, surplus, or unproductive animals were slaughtered for meat. Some meat was salted, smoked or dried for storage or shipment but, as a rule, animals were transported alive as long as possible. Fish were raised in impressive fisheries, primarily in southern Italy and in Spain, but much of that industry was devoted to raising expensive luxury items, such as eels and oysters, or to supply the raw materials for the manufacture of a fermented fish sauce, called *garum* or *liquamen*, that was used throughout the Mediterranean world. This sauce, used much as we use ketchup or mustard, was stored in jars and was easily transported. Large evaporation tanks, used to collect sea salt for preservation and seasoning, have been found on some farms.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 49.

Horses were harnessed to millstones and forced to walk around in circles to rotate the mechanism that ground the grain.

## MARKETING

All of these products were passed on to suppliers and to consumers in Rome and in the towns and villages of Italy and in the provinces. Every town required extensive granaries to store the grain that would eventually be ground to flour and baked into bread. Produce was sold in a marketplace or *forum*, sometimes by the farmer, sometimes through a middleman. A small town might have just one market, but larger towns, like Rome, had a vegetable market, a cattle market, and a fish market.



## Chapter 11 Exercises: *Farming*

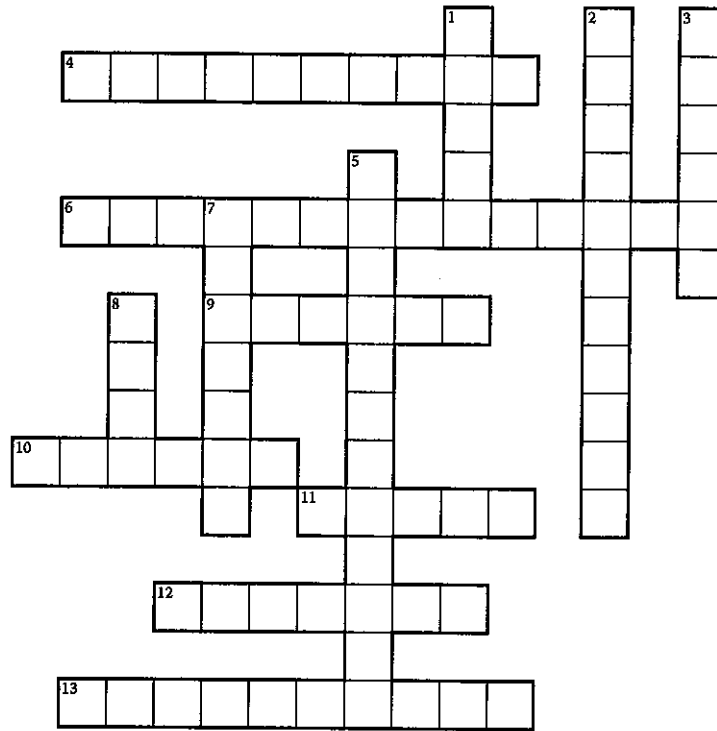
### TRUE OR FALSE

Indicate whether each statement is true or false.

1. ☐ Because the Italian soil was so dry, the earliest Romans imported most of the food they consumed.
2. ☐ We know a great deal about life on small farms from the numerous surviving remains of small Roman farmhouses.
3. ☐ A working, mid-sized farm complex was called a *villa rustica*.
4. ☐ *Villae rusticae* were built solely as working farms.
5. ☐ As Rome expanded and conquered more people, slaves flooded the markets and enabled the wealthy to buy up small farms and to create large-scale, slave-operated farms.
6. ☐ Large farms were known as *latifundia*.
7. ☐ The spread of *latifundia* posed no threat to small farmers, whose high-quality produce commanded higher prices in Roman markets.
8. ☐ Romans had no knowledge of crop rotation and consequently were unable to maximize the fertility of the soil.
9. ☐ Farming was a full-time job for the farm owner who had to be present at all times to direct the work and to manage the slaves.
10. ☐ Horses were used to pull plows and other heavy farm equipment.
11. ☐ Although the Romans knew how to preserve meat, they were unable to preserve grains, nuts, and legumes.
12. ☐ Romans cultivated and ate rodents.
13. ☐ Along with other animals raised on farms, such as chickens, sheep, goats, and pigs, Romans cultivated fish and mollusks.
14. ☐ Roman fish sauce, called *garum* or *liquamen*, was a rare and expensive luxury food item because it was so difficult to transport.
15. ☐ Produce was sold in a marketplace, called a *forum*.



## CROSSWORD PUZZLE



## Across

4. The practice of watering crops
6. Mid-sized farms
9. Used to make wine and vinegar
10. An animal used for lighter farm work
11. Another name for the popular fish sauce the Romans called *liquamen*
12. One way to preserve meat (Hint: there are two possible answers.)
13. Large-scale, factory farms

## Down

1. Farm animals that provide milk and cheese
2. The basis of Rome's economy
3. Food for animals
5. One way to maximize the fertility of the soil
7. Peas and beans, for example
8. Animals harnessed to heavy farm equipment